

Feeding the debate: a local food bank explains itself

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**Feeding the debate:
A local food bank explains itself**

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Final Submission to Voluntary Sector Review (pre-proofs):
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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of food banks in the UK has attracted considerable public debate. This paper brings the authors' experiences and observations from their involvement in one inner-city food bank into dialogue both with policy issues and the Christian theology that motivates many food bank volunteers. It argues for an attentiveness to what food banks *say* to society as well as what they *do*, and highlights their potential as spaces of encounter and mutuality.

Keywords

Food banks; faith; poverty; justice; community action

Introduction

The growth of food banks in the UK has given rise to considerable public debate over the past five years. From the political right there have been assertions that the very existence of food banks has generated demand, and from the left, accusations that they represent assent to, or even support of, state welfare retrenchment. Food banks have themselves supplied political ammunition, with data on their prevalence and usage being employed to highlight pressing social and economic problems, both by The Trussell Trust (which has a network of over 400 food banks across the UK), and by those commenting or lobbying from other standpoints, including church leaders, charities, politicians and journalists (e.g. Cooper and Dumbleton, 2013; Gentleman, 2015). Amidst this flurry of debate, however, there have been relatively few opportunities for those involved in providing food banks at a local level to articulate what it is they are seeking to do, and why.

Beyond the recognition that many food banks are run by local churches (or groups of them acting together) and Christian faith-based organisations (FBOs), there is perhaps relatively little understanding of what might motivate such activity, its place within a portfolio of responses to social needs at a local level and beyond, and the ways in which it plays out relationally and practically in specific contexts. In this paper, we draw on our experience¹ as trustees of a small charity which runs the Aston and Nechells Food Bank (ANFB) in Birmingham to illustrate some of these more detailed and contingent aspects of food bank practice within a particular local context. We seek to articulate

some of the interactions we observe between the local, the theological and the political in relation to food banks, and in doing so to highlight some alternative and more nuanced possibilities, both for the way that we conceptualise this form of faith-based voluntary action, and for how it might be practised. Specifically, we explore the way in which the encounters that food banks facilitate can be transformative for clients and volunteers alike; consider some possibilities for mutuality and empowerment; and describe efforts to ensure that structural issues and longer term needs are addressed alongside responding to crisis situations.

In what follows, then, we place our practice-based experience and observations into dialogue with contemporary policy, media and academic debates, and use these to frame our explanation of what ANFB is *doing*, whilst also asking what ANFB and other food banks like it might be *saying* to wider society, policy makers and politicians.

Context: Some key debates

In addition to media and political debates, this paper sits at the confluence of a number of key areas of academic work. Space does not permit a thorough review, but within the voluntary sector literature we can point to previous studies that attend to the complex and contested relationships between FBOs or faith communities and the state (e.g. Williams *et al.*, 2012; Conradson, 2008; Harris *et al.*, 2007; Cloke *et al.*, 2005) and which note the relative lack of research around the informal social engagement of local church congregations, for example (Weir, 2014). Zooming out to a disciplinary perspective, we find calls from within academic social policy (e.g. Dinham, 2014; Furbey *et al.* 2005) and public theology (Graham, 2014) for better explanations of faith-based social engagement that travel across disciplines and professions, and faith backgrounds.

Focusing on food banks more specifically, Lambie-Mumford's (e.g. 2013) work has been significant in documenting and interpreting their increasing prevalence in the UK. Highlighting the Trussell Trust's engagement in campaigning activity alongside the provision of emergency food, she notes that their approach is explicitly 'premised on the existence and work of wider state and other statutory support' (Lambie-Mumford, 2013, p. 81). Nevertheless, the paper raises the concern that food banks may inadvertently be contributing to the retrenchment of state welfare by sparing policy makers the need to respond to poverty. Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2015, p. 414) go further, arguing that 'hunger, 'food poverty', and household food insecurity are increasingly depoliticised through the actions of the voluntary sector, often church-led, in sustaining a charitable food response'. They also suggest that offering debt or budgeting advice alongside food provision is akin to locating the blame for food poverty with individuals rather than structural factors.

Further concerns about food banks are raised in Helen Cameron's (2014) theological reflection on 'The morality of the food parcel', including around the removal of choice for food bank recipients in terms of their household eating practices; the suggestion that donors to food banks will give food to the poor but not eat *with* them; and the potential for generosity to undermine accountability and create dependency, rather than challenging factors contributing to food bank use such as high cost credit and benefit sanctions.

Each of these authors raise important concerns and undoubtedly the tension between meeting presenting needs and challenging structural injustices is one keenly felt by many involved in food banks (and indeed many other forms of service provision, both in the voluntary and statutory

sectors), as Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2015) acknowledge. However, our experience in Aston and Nechells, and our engagement with the Trussell Trust, calls into question the assumptions upon which some of the criticisms levelled at food banks are based. We argue that both a closer look, and a wider perspective, on food banks and other forms of social engagement by local churches are needed in order to better understand the ways in which they can function, particularly in deprived urban communities. We do not posit food banks as 'ideal' by any means, but suggest that there are ways in which they can simultaneously contribute to meeting immediate needs and challenging injustice, both locally and nationally.

The Aston and Nechells Food Bank

The Aston and Nechells Food Bank serves the inner city areas of Birmingham covered by the B6, B7 and B8 postcode districts (including Aston, Nechells, Washward Heath, Ward End and Saltley), as well as clients who are referred from the immediately surrounding areas. Its catchment area has very high levels of multiple deprivation. The Church of England parish in which ANFB is based is amongst the most deprived 1% of parishes in England according to 2010 data: 45% of children live in poverty, 30% of working age adults receive out-of-work benefits and 41% have no qualifications (Church Urban Fund, no date). 83% of the parish's population are from minority ethnic groups (ibid.). Most of the area ANFB serves is in the Ladywood parliamentary constituency which in February 2015 had an unemployment rate of 13.6% (Birmingham: 6.4%; UK: 2.7%) (Birmingham City Council, 2015). In addition, but difficult to measure, are high levels of isolation and loneliness, particularly amongst residents – often women – who have little or no English.

ANFB was launched in November 2011 with two distribution points (a third opened in 2014). It was established as a project of a local charity (CAN DO 4:13) founded by the Church of England parish. ANFB is part of The Trussell Trust network of food banks, and as such follows their operating model (for description see: Lambie-Mumford, 2013). It is entirely volunteer-run with no paid staff. The management committee comprises nine individuals from five local churches. The volunteers who help with collections, warehousing and distribution are from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and most are local people living in the ANFB catchment area. Most come from local churches, but there are also volunteers who are Muslim, Sikh, or have no faith allegiance. Eleven volunteers are long term unemployed, and four are supported volunteers who have particular needs such as learning difficulties and other disabilities.

ANFB offers volunteering opportunities for former clients and other vulnerable and isolated people in the community. Clients often say they want to 'give something back'. Some come and do this. For some this has involved giving a couple of hours to help with a monthly supermarket collection. For three former clients, all long term unemployed, now volunteering in warehousing or distribution, this has become a regular part of their week. Furthermore, in an area characterised by high unemployment, two former volunteers who were long term unemployed have acquired confidence and skills from their voluntary work and have now found paid work.

Clients are issued vouchers by one of 102 partner agencies (including statutory and voluntary organisations), enabling them to use the food bank. In 2014, ANFB gave out nearly 17 tonnes of emergency food in fulfilling 1166 vouchers for the benefit of 2385 people². 63% of those vouchers were issued because of changes or delays in social security benefits. 15% were due to low income. 21.5 tonnes of food was received from the 70 donor partners (mostly churches and schools in the

catchment area, and a handful of local employers) and the general public through collections at supermarkets.

ANFB consciously seeks to be a community food bank, drawing food donations as far as possible from within the local community. More food might be collected from supermarkets in more affluent areas, but ANFB chooses to have its main monthly collection at the local supermarket. While this increases awareness of the food bank and is easier for local volunteers involved in collecting food to get to, it also enables the local community to see it as a bank. Some donors comment that they are donating this month while recognising that they may soon need to make a withdrawal – and vice versa. The generosity of some donors is particularly moving.

ANFB also seeks to do more than just meet clients' needs for food. Firstly, the distribution volunteers have signposting information for a range of other organisations and, through a partnership with a local lottery-funded agency and other organisations, debt, benefits and housing advice are made available to clients at distribution sessions³. Secondly, ANFB is able to link clients with a range of other initiatives which take place at its distribution points. These include a parent and toddler group, youth and children's groups, a pre-school nursery and a credit union. Thirdly, the trustees, management committee and distribution volunteers are keenly aware that benefit-related problems are by far the most frequent reason for referral to ANFB, which – in addition to issues relating to low incomes – makes the connection to national policy issues readily apparent. They therefore seek to challenge the causes of food poverty. One way in which this is done is through the use of data that is collected and inputted by a small team of volunteers, for instance regarding reasons for client referrals to the food bank: this helps inform local and national campaigns about policy issues, including those of the Trussell Trust. Other responses to this have included arranging awareness raising sessions about disputing benefits sanctions, writing to local MPs, and highlighting the social issues that the food bank exposes in presentations to local businesses, students and other groups.

Foundational Principles

The decision to start ANFB was made by the local Church of England churches as a conscious expression of their Christian faith and commitment to the most disadvantaged people in the parish. From the outset there was a commitment to working alongside people of other faiths and no particular faith, and so other organisations, including other churches, as well as individuals got involved. The beliefs and backgrounds of ANFB's volunteers are therefore diverse, and in view of that it should be noted that the interpretations that follow are our own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of all ANFB volunteers (nor indeed of all food banks). Nevertheless, a clear Christian ethos is an intrinsic part of ANFB and the teachings of the Christian faith have a significant influence on it. This is manifested in the policies and processes in place (including those of The Trussell Trust) and also, for many volunteers, through the outworking of their personal Christian faith, this being the main underlying reason for their commitment of time and energy⁴.

This paper cannot adequately summarise the content of the Bible as it relates to poverty, social justice and community, but two principles that are pertinent to our purposes in this paper will be briefly considered. The first is the notion that all human beings are created 'in the image of God' (Genesis 1:27, New International Version). This means that each person is to be treated with great worth and dignity, but it also serves as a reminder of the relational nature of human existence, reflecting the Christian understanding of God as a relational being of three persons (Father, Son and

Holy Spirit). This underpins the importance of cultivating non-judgemental, compassionate and empathic relationships between volunteers and clients, and also encourages a recognition of our mutual inter-dependence as human beings. This recognition provides a base from which to draw alongside someone in difficulty, rather than patronise or condemn, as well as an expectation that individuals will all at different times and in different ways (some less visible than others) be in positions of giving to and receiving from others. In keeping with this, various expressions of reciprocity and mutual support can be identified within and around ANFB: some of these are highlighted in the following section.

The second principle is the understanding found in the Bible of '*shalom*', a Hebrew word which is frequently translated rather inadequately as 'peace'. *Shalom* can be understood more fully as embracing a sense of relational wholeness (with God and other people), health and wellbeing, justice, having sufficient resources, making a worthwhile contribution to society and feeling safe and secure (Keller, 2012). This highlights that material need is not the only form of poverty: a deficit in any of these areas is deemed worthy of attention. One might think of *shalom* as a biblical perspective on human flourishing, and there is much within the list above about which people from a variety of different faiths – and people of no religious faith – can find agreement on and collaborate towards. Importantly, *shalom* is represented as relevant to whole communities and societies, regardless of a person's religious beliefs: all can participate in bringing it about. Thus, those who contribute to securing greater economic justice, for example, are contributing to aspects of *shalom*.

For Christians, Jesus is the key figure whose life and actions bring *shalom*. He models a pattern of life and ministry that involves collaboration and a degree of dependence on others. For example, when the Bible records Jesus' use of a boy's five loaves and two fish to feed a multitude of people, it also mentions his involvement of the disciples in distributing the food and collecting leftovers. Significantly, *shalom* is inherently relational and presents the wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies as inter-connected: personal and social wellbeing are not separable. An illustration of this is the way in which volunteers contribute to meeting the needs of clients, and experience benefits to their own wellbeing through engaging in worthwhile activity in the local community together with others.

Discussion

The significance of encounter and inter-dependency

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty's (2014, p. 5-6) *Feeding Britain* report stated: 'We live at a time when many of the givens by way of family life, social networks, friendship groups, and self-help infrastructure are simply not there. This means that the issues people face relating to hunger and food poverty are exacerbated and heightened... We believe that the rise in the use of food banks is a sign of the breakdown of this core value in our society.' But whilst food banks may be symptomatic of, amongst other things, a highly individualistic society, they can also represent spaces which counter this isolation and disconnectedness. The Trussell Trust model places an emphasis on offering hospitality – in the form of hot drinks, biscuits, company and the offer of conversation – alongside the provision of food. Commenting on the *Feeding Britain* report, Archbishop Justin Welby (2014) pointed to the significance of social interactions within food

banks: 'Equally as important, the gift of food, delivered with compassion and a listening ear, can begin a remarkable process. It helps to forge a connection with some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. Once forged, this connection encourages people to open up so they can get to the bottom of what is causing their hunger in the first place – be it a crippling debt or something else.' Increased interdependency and social connections can help to avoid the continued individualisation of problems and blame for failure to resolve them.

Isolation and loneliness are known to be major problems in Aston and Nechells, the latter being an area in which many people are housed temporarily by the local authority before being moved to other parts of the city. Cameron (2014, p. 198) notes that 'sharing a meal is at the heart of living in a household', and urges those involved in food banks to consider how they may be disrupting that experience by introducing donated food, which differs from that which a family would choose themselves. This is an important and challenging concern. However, 57% of ANFB's clients in 2014 were individuals living alone. For some clients, then, the friendly welcome, cup of tea and conversation while a food parcel is prepared is an opportunity for meaningful social interaction as well as material provision. Making clients aware of other activities going on at the distribution points also opens up possibilities for longer term relationships, such as through Stay and Play groups, church services or community events.

There is a need for attentiveness to the power dynamics that arise when resources held by one individual or group are released to another, and the following sections highlight ways in which ANFB seeks to challenge and subvert the potential 'them' (helped) and 'us' (helping) dichotomy. It should be recognised though that the encounters that take place within food banks can be transformative for volunteers as well as clients. For those volunteers who have had little experience of poverty or negotiating the benefits system themselves, hearing clients tell their stories can be formative in terms of their perceptions, understanding, ability to empathise, and perhaps to advocate, be that practically, politically or through simply speaking differently in social settings about those who might otherwise be labelled as 'scroungers'.

Stories of inter-personal encounters that take place within ANFB – those highlighting the difficult social and financial situations that people are facing, and those relating the difference ANFB has made in someone's life – have been important in mobilising resources to support the food bank (e.g. from local businesses), and in prompting additional forms of local engagement. Indeed, looking beyond the local, ANFB along with other food banks in the UK are arguably facilitating another kind of encounter at a national scale: namely an increasingly public encounter with poverty. Understanding these macro-level responses is important in interpreting the motives and impact of food banks, and we return to these in more detail later.

Possibilities for empowerment

Food banks have been criticised as operating a paternalistic client-provider model of charity (see Kramer, 1981). ANFB seeks to resist this in two main ways. Firstly, through its focus on being a local food bank: as described above, the majority of volunteers live in the catchment area, and the main monthly supermarket collections take place in this area. For some clients, having the opportunity to give food when times are better as well as receive it in a crisis has been important in maintaining a sense of dignity when needing to ask for help. Secondly, it provides opportunities for former clients and more vulnerable members of the local community to contribute as supported volunteers. This

gives them an experience of teamwork and belonging, and for some has helped them to gain confidence and skills and move into employment. This blurring of boundaries between those supporting and those supported is arguably important in fostering empathy, dignity and respect within the food bank. ANFB's supported volunteers are able to make a contribution to their community where they might otherwise have been treated as dependent consumers of services.

This is not to suggest that socially and economically deprived areas can or should secure their own wellbeing entirely without assistance, intervention or influence from beyond the local community: indeed, the contribution of volunteers from outside the area who have particular skills in management or administration, for example, has been indispensable in the development and maintenance of ANFB. Neither do we assert that ANFB fully embodies the interdependent, empowering relationships that we [the authors] aspire to – or takes precisely the form that our theological, social and political values might lead us to envisage as ideal: as we observe with policy implementation, putting these values into practice is always complex, arduous, contingent and incomplete, particularly in a context that is resource-poor according to most socio-economic indicators. However, the way in which members of the local community make provision for one another, drawing on their own strengths of compassion, generosity and determination, shapes ANFB into something rather different from the paternalistic model that food banks are frequently presumed to take.

Food banks in the political sphere: mixing religion and politics?

The presence of food banks within local communities has arguably rendered poverty more visible in the national media than it otherwise would have been. In the case of Trussell Trust food banks, this is not accidental: gathering data that can be used for campaigning and awareness-raising is integral to their approach. ANFB collects data about reasons for voucher issue, partner agencies' use of vouchers (local Job Centres being among the most frequent) and so on, recognising that this is important in holding those in authority to account, whether locally or nationally. As such, whilst some argue that food banks 'let the state off the hook' and 'conceal realities of poverty and hunger' (Dowler, 2012), for many volunteers, bringing issues of poverty and living standards into sharper focus in the public and political arena is an important facet of their involvement.

Both nationally and locally, those involved in food banks cannot be expected to speak with one political voice: personal views on the causes and solutions to poverty will vary. However, some misconceptions about the political and theological positioning of food banks and those involved in them may have arisen partly *because* of the intensive media and political focus there has been on this particular form of faith-based social engagement. Criticisms levelled at the narrowness of food banks' provision in relation to the nature of the needs arguably fail to put them in proper perspective in at least two key respects: firstly in terms of the scope and nature of faith-based community engagement, and secondly in terms of their multiple functions as faith-based organisations.

Churches have been urged – perhaps rightly – to 'rebalance church-based activity away from emergency crisis support and towards long-term work that tackles the underlying problems' (Church Urban Fund, 2013, p. 2). However, for many Christians and local churches, food banks are but one

amongst a variety of existing ways in which they seek to make a difference in their local communities and more widely (Williams et al. 2012; e.g. <http://www.cinnamonnetwork.co.uk>). At the very least the fact that signposting to statutory and third sector services as appropriate is standard practice within ANFB and other Trussell Trust food banks, is itself an acknowledgement that food banks do not perceive themselves to be an ‘all-sufficient’ response to poverty. Furthermore, the food bank sits within a landscape of community engagement that includes parent and toddler groups, shared meals, community events, youth and children’s activities, as well as a great deal of emotional, practical and spiritual support that is given and received on a one-to-one level. Some food bank clients are individuals whom local churches are already engaging with in other longer-term ways. Furthermore, amongst ANFB volunteers there are those whose occupations see them providing health, education or social care services in the public sector. As such, to assess the social engagement of local churches or their members solely in terms of their involvement in the food bank would be inappropriate.

Interpretations of food banks also need to be put in perspective by attentiveness to their campaigning and value-expressive functions (Kendall, 2003). Some of the mechanisms through which ANFB seeks to campaign, influence and raise awareness regarding the causes of poverty were outlined earlier (p. 3-4). In politics, academia and the media there has been far greater interest in what faith-based organisations do in terms of service delivery than in what they might have to say regarding social justice (Conradson, 2008; Harris et al. 2007). Hélder Câmara, a former Roman Catholic Archbishop in Brazil once remarked: ‘When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist’. And whilst food banks and faith groups have been accused of depoliticizing poverty by promoting and providing food banks, like other parts of the voluntary sector, they have arguably found *themselves* being depoliticized within a public sphere that seems much more interested in churches’ potential as service providers in deprived urban communities, than in their perspectives on the causes and longer term solutions to the problems faced in such contexts. As a recent survey of press releases from churches has shown, there has been no shortage of concerned campaigning from church leaders about the implications of austerity and welfare reform (Bennett, 2015).

In addition to highlighting problems with social structures and administration, the theology that underpins ANFB’s local engagement also offers a positive alternative to the status quo. To feed those who are hungry without asking why they are hungry represents only a partial response to the Christian injunction to love one’s neighbour. Furthermore, a food parcel, cup of tea and caring conversation will not enable those neighbours who are facing hunger and other forms of poverty to experience the fullness of *shalom* described earlier. To move closer to that might involve them being supported to move from a sense of disempowerment towards greater participation as an inter-dependent member of a community; or it might involve them being able to speak up for themselves – or have others speak on their behalf – so that they are treated more justly by those whose decisions influence their lives. In one of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, there is the instruction: ‘seek the peace [*shalom*] and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper’ (Jeremiah 29:7, New International Version). This seeking of flourishing or *shalom* within the local community (and beyond it) is an important motivation for many ANFB volunteers, and also underpins much of what they do outside of ANFB. This activity then can be both religious and political – and volunteers often find more *shalom* for themselves as they seek it for others.

Conclusions: What are food banks saying to society?

In closing we consider some of the implications of the preceding discussions for wider public and policy debates, addressing these from the perspective of our experiences and observations in a particular local context. In doing so, we draw out some of the functions of voluntary sector activity that academic research and political debates focussed around service provision frequently overlook: namely the social interaction that they facilitate, the values they give expression to and the social issues they draw attention to. Each of these, we argue, is significant in understanding the potential contribution – and relationship – of food banks to wider UK society.

In functioning as spaces of encounter between people of diverse backgrounds, and seeking to cultivate non-judgemental relationships, food banks can operate in a way that is counter-cultural in modern Britain. The Social Integration Commission's (2014) report highlights the importance of interaction between people of different social and ethnic backgrounds for community cohesion, trust and wellbeing, stating that: 'Without action to promote greater integration, the danger grows that in the face of the many and complex challenges of the future, instead of asking 'how can we solve this together?', the people of the UK will ask 'who can we blame?'. As the report notes, such attitudes are already evident in relation to benefits recipients and immigrants. Encounters and relationships across diversity at a local level are vital in reshaping and challenging negative preconceptions. Christian theology has much to offer in terms of both the recognition of inter-dependency, and its practice: this is essential not only in terms of informing the way in which interactions within food banks and similar contexts take shape, but also in terms of the message that food banks can communicate to a wider public.

There are many interfaces at which faith-based and other voluntary sector groups engage with the deep and complex social issues within areas of multiple deprivation (Bickley, 2014; Williams *et al.*, 2012): but food banks have been part of a recent heightening of media, public and political awareness and debate around poverty, its extent and causes and about what might be done in response. Data on Trussell Trust food bank usage has been deliberately recorded and released to draw attention to levels of poverty that people are experiencing in the UK and to the part that problems with social security benefits play in this. This campaigning action emerges from the outworking of theological principles, practical experience, and data, in a way which is unavoidably political and which makes some key statements. One such statement is that food poverty is not acceptable: change is being sought that goes beyond local level voluntary provision of emergency food. Another is that food banks do not see themselves as a long term solution to food poverty: root causes need to be addressed (Perry *et al.*, 2014).

This voice – along with others – seems to be achieving a measure of influence, with strategies for eliminating the need for food banks and reviewing benefits sanctions receiving some political attention. More substantial change around issues such as benefits sanctions is yet to be achieved. However, the notion that food banks – and the churches and other organisations that run them – are depoliticising food poverty would appear to be based on a selective, service delivery-focussed assessment of their social engagement, and perhaps an over-optimistic assessment of the ease with which policy, politicians and policy-makers can be influenced, when it comes to reversing or radically altering their approaches or even core social and political beliefs. Further qualitative research into the processes and practices through which faith communities and organisations seek to influence

policy and public opinion both locally and nationally – and the factors influencing the efficacy or otherwise of such measures – might provide an insightful alternative angle regarding engagement with political issues and structural causes of poverty.

The holistic nature of the concept of *shalom*, encompassing relational wholeness, health and wellbeing, justice, sufficiency of material resources, making a worthwhile contribution to society and feeling safe and secure, tells us that relatively minor policy, administrative or spending adjustments will not suffice to resolve the problems that food banks highlight. Something that is missing – if the prevalence of discourse about benefits ‘scroungers’ is indicative of the national mood – is a sense of solidarity across diversity at a national level that would lend itself to the pursuit of a more socially and economically just state of affairs. Here the theology and practices worked out – albeit falteringly and incompletely - in food banks like ANFB have something positive to offer through demonstrating that boundaries between giving and receiving can be blurred and crossed: indeed both positions are often occupied simultaneously, if unwittingly. Recognising inter-dependency, and the way in which it can be masked by social or economic privilege, is essential in the unpicking of some of the damaging stereotypes that have come to the fore in debates about welfare reform. As such, while this recognition must increasingly shape practices and relationships within faith-based social engagement at a local level, it is also a vital message that ANFB and other groups inspired by the Christian faith can bring to the social policy table.

In concluding, our observations and reflections based on ANFB suggest firstly that what food banks are *saying* to society – by their existence and operation, as well as through proactive awareness raising and campaigning – may be at least as significant as what they are *doing*. And secondly, that what they are *doing*, and the motivations behind this, are more complex than popular representations make out. For practitioners involved in food bank provision, some of the practices and principles outlined above may be helpful resources for walking the challenging path of seeking to balance provision for those in urgent need with resisting injustice and empowering individuals and communities.

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¹ Andy has been chair of CAN DO 4:13 since its inception. For the past 3 years he has also chaired the ANFB management committee. Heather was a trustee of the charity from April 2013 – August 2015. They regularly work alongside other ANFB volunteers either at supermarket collections, distribution sessions or warehousing operations. The charity name CAN DO 4:13 is drawn from the biblical text in Philippians 4:13.

² This represents the number of people in the households receiving a food package.

³ CAN DO 4:13 previously ran an Advice Centre with up to 6 paid staff until 2013, when government funding for this ended.

⁴ In a survey of ANFB volunteers in 2013, 83% of respondents stated that their involvement was motivated by their faith.